

The Early Tales of Snow and Oakham

A Novel by Philip Chavanne

“Isn’t it strange how princes and kings,
And clowns that caper in sawdust rings,
and common people, like you and me,
are builders for eternity?

Each is given a list of rules;
a shapeless mass; a bag of tools.
And each must fashion, ere life is flown,
A stumbling block, or a Stepping-Stone.”

- RL Sharpe

*I wish to dedicate this book to my father,
David Chavanne and to Kanakuk Kamps -
two of the great stepping-stones in my life.
Without them this story never would have
been possible.*

Table of Contents:

Prologue

Part I - The Tenpenny Three

- Chapter 1 Change is in the Air
- Chapter 2 Melting Snow, Melting Hearts
- Chapter 3 The Last Hours of Boyhood
- Chapter 4 The Adventure Begins
- Chapter 5 The Rojo Prieta
- Chapter 6 The King of Kamchatka
- Chapter 7 Feathers and First Blood
- Chapter 8 Muleshoe

Part II - The Wild West End

- Chapter 1 Back at Tenpenny
- Chapter 2 Whitehorse
- Chapter 3 The Birth of Stuart Whitlock
- Chapter 4 Gathering the Posse
- Chapter 5 Strangers from Across the Sea
- Chapter 6 The Student from Gromalsk
- Chapter 7 Brave Fools and Lucky Branches
- Chapter 8 The Pritchers
- Chapter 9 Into the Lion's Den
- Chapter 10 The Rejuvenation of Unger Soski
- Chapter 11 Pennies from Heaven
- Chapter 12 On Their Heals
- Chapter 13 A Dark Chase Needs a Silent Hound
- Chapter 14 A Dowry for Mary Mdingwe
- Chapter 15 A Feather in Their Caps

Part III - The Legacy of Thaddeus Parnicca

- Chapter 1 Milk and Honey
- Chapter 2 The Milk of Friendship
- Chapter 3 A Burial at Sea
- Chapter 4 The Sons of Otsov Kolschen

- Chapter 5 Arrivals
- Chapter 6 Sissy's Hurdles
- Chapter 7 The Western Rim of the World
- Chapter 8 Six Pigs for the Big Man
- Chapter 9 Secrets of the Mountain
- Chapter 10 Departures
- Chapter 11 How Tenpenny Came to Be
- Chapter 11 The Pickleman
- Chapter 12 Hands and Feet

Prologue

"We orphans we lament to the world: World, why have you taken our soft mothers from us. And the fathers who say: My child, you are like me!"

Nelly Sachs (1891–1970)

1968

Tipper

When Tip Holland turned eighteen he came out in the freedom of the summer heat like a thirsty vessel, a wounded pup, and went searching for his father. Having no other idea where to start he finally asked his mother, there in the sweaty lime green kitchen of the Harlem Heights.

“What you wanna know for, sonny?”

“Other fellas know their pops,” he said. “I figure I should get mine.”

She turned on him with ailing grief. “Oh, you’ll get yours, I figure. Right across the chops. You know it was right here where he done it - with you and your sister inside me he held me down and beat me cause the ‘beans are burnin’. I bled right down onto my big round belly. You don’t wanna find your father, Tip. He beat me every chance he got.”

Just like he’d seen in the movies the boy flicked his cigarette onto the floor and rubbed it out. “You better button that lip, girl. A man like me don’t need no advice.”

He was a pale boy, with a pot-marked face in the spring and summer but the look of trouble the rest of the year. Like all of his runaround neighbors in the Harlem heights none of his mother’s prayers had taken hold.

In that first week of his eighteenth summer his mind began to unravel. The knowledge of his father became the first thought; first, middle and final and he couldn’t grasp what ghosts or dreams he would chase if not his father. He couldn’t comprehend where the urge had come from, but it was the last innocent pursuit he could envision, the death rattle of his childhood hopes.

He rode the subway to the Upper East Side and found his twin sister, Sissy, baking in the shop where she worked.

“World you want?”

“I’m out to find our father.”

“Hah! What for?”

“Other fellas know their pops,” he said. “I figure I should get mine.”

“Why tell me?”

“Don’t know where he is.”

“Well like I do. Last I heard he’s long gone. Not even his old freight men know him anymore.”

“How do you know that?”

“Saw one. Months ago at the laundry. Told me that Pappy hasn’t come to the east side since we were kids. Man was huntin dope.”

“What man?”

Tipper spent two days searching names of ex-employers, ex-friends and ex-lovers for the man who was his father. Though there was no man to find. The thing that had fathered him wasn’t a man, but an eternal child, who was a world away, searching too. All Tip learned was that his old man had left the City years before, taken a freight job overseas, and was last known in a place called Estonia, though Tip had no earthly clue where that was.

The boy had no money and no prospects and the limits of his ambition had been reached. Twice in that first month he was picked up for dope, both times while standing

outside a club on Lamar street. Tip had seen a movie where a street-wise kid had gotten the attention of a crime boss by smoking dope in broad daylight. So he dressed in an oversized pinstripe suit his father had left behind, and puffed away as he threw glances inside the club. Both times the police arrived at the owner's request.

After hearing of the second arrest a man named Unger Soski entered the scene. He was a parole officer whose wife went to church with Tip's mother. After the second arrest Unger went down to the station and bailed the boy out, as a favor to his wife.

"You some kinda law?" Tip asked.

"Nope. Just a friend."

"Cause law don't hold me. Twice I been in. Twice I come out."

"I bailed you out, son."

"They seen something in me they was scared of."

As was his custom, Mr. Soski checked up on the boy at his home after a month. He brought flowers for the ladies at his wife's request, and a Bible for the boy on his own accord.

"What have you been doing with yourself, Tip?"

"Oh, you know. This and that. This and that. Got some things going, you know. Working out some plans. Meeting with some people."

"He's been sitting around the house for a month," Sissy said. "On Friday nights he dresses up like he's made or something and talks about his big-shot friends on the east side."

"Big-shot friends, huh?"

"Oh you know," Tip said. "Gotta keep connected. You aren't connected you fall apart."

"Are you connected, Tip?"

"You don't even know," Tip smiled. "Things are happening."

Sissy shook her head. "Nothing's happening. Nothing's ever happening. He just sits around watching mobsters on TV and makes threats and talks about those big-shots on the east side at some club he goes to."

"Why haven't I heard about this?"

"Well I don't want to brag but things are so good right now. So good."

"Sounds like it. I can barely soak it all in the way you tell it."

Tipper got lost, staring out the window. "Yeah I'm getting to be a pretty big deal on the east side."

"No, you're not," Sissy said. "No he's not. He's not even smart enough to hide his lies."

"I'm a big deal on the east side."

"A big deal, huh?"

"People know me."

"No one knows you," Sissy said. "We're the only people that know you."

"Okay. You'll see. I don't mean to brag. I don't want to make no one jealous."

"Jealous? You think we're jealous, Tip?"

"Well you would be if you knew what I know. But that's okay. Things are so good. I don't mean to brag. A man like me doesn't need to brag. It just speaks for itself."

Sissy chuckled into her apron. "You ain't no tough guy, Tipper."

"You wanna bet, little Sister? Unger, I don't want to hurt her again like I used to when we were younger. Tell her to stop. She doesn't even know."

"He used to hurt you when you were younger?"

"Yep," she laughed. "We were playing soccer and he tripped me. We were on the yellow team."

"That ain't all," Tip said. "Now you better listen. I asked nicely. I won't ask nicely again. Tell her to stop, Unger. She don't even know what I can do."

Unger sighed, "You ain't no tough guy, Tip. I can't quite figure what you are - but you sure ain't no tough guy."

One afternoon Sissy dropped a letter on his chest while he was sleeping. An hour later Tip sat on the balcony with the letter before him, his eyes dodging, his hands nervously preoccupied. Sissy watched him weeping through her window.

"I've been drafted," he told her.

It was the most beautiful sentence he had ever uttered. "Oh. No."

"Yes, Sissy. It's true. You see I've been drafted. Drafted, drafted, drafted. I don't know how it happened."

"It was fate. They drew your number."

"But why me, Sissy? Why... was I...drafted?"

"Maybe they heard you were free for the next couple of years. If you'd had a job maybe you wouldn't have been drafted, drafted, drafted." though she knew it wasn't true.

"D'you think they'd let me stay because of my domestic obligations?"

"What are you talking about? That makes me sick."

"You forget that I'm looking for our father."

"I do forget that. How true."

"Maybe they'll give me time to find him. Other fellas know their pops," he said. "I figure, I should get mine."

"You do that, Tip. Tell 'em whose boss. I'm off to work."

In tears he stood to hug her but she weaseled her way out.

The following week Unger paid the family his usual visit. Before dinner was served the boy rang a fork against his glass. "Listen up ladies, hush that talking a minute."

"Oh, Lord," said Sissy.

He spoke proudly and methodically, as if his words were rehearsed. "A strong man leaves nothing to chance. And that's what I've always aimed to be, a strong man."

"You finished?"

"I've decided to enlist," he told them. "Rather than be drafted. I won't let chance decide my fate."

Sissy turned to Unger, generally surprised. "Can he do that?"

"Already did," Tip told her. "Notified my recruiter, got tested and in two weeks I'll join the 82nd Airborne. My bus leaves for Ft. Benton."

"Why wait?" she asked.

"Unger and me gonna go fishing first."

"Fishing?"

“In Alaska,” Unger admitted. “I’ve wanted to go since I was a kid. I’ve just never had the time or anyone to go with.”

“There are bears up there,” Tip said. “Big ones. Unger heard that I was a soldier now and asked me to be his bodyguard.”

And Unger winked at the women.

It was a week of heavy handshakes, of Priests and dentists calling the boy up to wish, “God speed”. For the first time in her life Sissy said openly, “I’m proud of you.”

So Tip Holland left his family and fled west for what he called, “My next big adventure.” It was an encouragement to his mother to see him spending time with Unger. It was a delight to his sister that he was finally about to leave.

Unger taught Tipper how to fish the big waters, how to pitch a tent, how to fire a pistol. “You’ll get plenty of that in basic,” he told him. “But it never hurts to come prepared.”

They kayaked up the coast, two full days along the beach.

“I sure am glad you chose to enlist,” Unger told him. They were cooking their fish along the sand.

“A strong man leaves nothing to chance,” Tip said. “And that’s what I’ve always aimed to be, a strong man.”

“You think you’ll be a career man?”

“I’ll give it a few years. Play the field. See what they know.”

“They have a lot to offer you.”

“I have a lot to offer them, too. Don’t forget that, Soski. If I don’t like it I’ll just come home.”

Unger cracked a smile, “I used to be much like you,” he told him. “When I was younger. I didn’t know my father either so I used to think I could do anything.”

“A man like me doesn’t need to think. I just do.”

Again, Unger sighed, “We’ve got to work on that mouth of yours, Tip.”

Suddenly the boy was staring off at the sea. He became fixed on the distant trees. Finally he repeated the words, “*We’ve got to work on that mouth of yours, Tip.*”

“That’s right. We do.”

And again, dead to the world, Tip said, “*We’ve got to work on that mouth of yours, Tip.*”

Unger smiled awkwardly. Try as he might he didn’t understand this boy. The distance between them was greater than he had realized. He watched him fidget beneath his blanket, his eye twitching.

Now the boy was speaking in a whisper. “*We’ve got to work on that mouth of yours, Tip.*”

Unger was standing to his feet, still smiling, when Tipper shot him in the back. He had seen it done in a movie - where a double-crosser shoots the boss so he can rise to power. Instantly the big man crashed to the sand. Tipper removed the cash from his pocket, hauled his pack onto his shoulders and kayaked down the beach, afraid to look back at the body twitching in the surf.

That afternoon he arrived at a fishing port, pawned the pistol and the kayak and away he went. He thumbed up the coast, a footpath, then a train. The next day he convinced a Ruski Crab King to let him book passage through the long island chain that

connected to the world across the sea. In exchange he agreed to complete petty duties in the galley. The skipper gave him a cot for eight days until, in the midst of a white-capped gale, they made berth on the wild shores of Kamchatka. He buttoned his coat and pointed West towards Estonia. And so went the cowardly travels of Tip Holland. He was neither a volunteer nor a fate-seeker when his journey began.

1982

Sissy had been picky with her suitors and never married. It seems that if you hold out on life, life will return the favor. She soon grew tired of the rabble of the Harlem Heights and began to set her mind to becoming a woman pursuant of noble causes: namely etiquette and fine dining. She enrolled in various courses at the local community college and other etiquette schools in Manhattan, steering her life away from anything to do with her brother's shame. She found that the rigidity of high society fit nicely within her self-perceptions. She preferred to live a beautiful lie than an embarrassing truth.

Sissy continued to live with her mother, who spent her days without asking questions. With her daughter beside her, Sissy's mom baked and chored and kept to herself until finally her mind began to go and the questions returned.

"Where are the men?" she asked her daughter.

"They're gone. All gone."

"Feels different without them."

"How does it feel different?"

"Feels peaceful and boring. Lonely and prosperous."

"Prosperous is good."

"Prosperous is phony, sugar. Only adversity is real. We gals have a monopoly on real."

She spent her long late years scrubbing herself of possible infections and rearranging furniture and died after she split her toe, the second one down from the fatty, on a heavy walnut roll-top she thought should take on more light. And because her incessant scrubbing had left her immune system unpracticed, the little scratch let in toxic invaders that chewed at her from within before her healing agents got the call. She died wishing the coffee table was a bit closer.

Once the furniture was hocked and the deed sold, at the exact moment when Sissy slipped her sunglasses onto her nose and was about to unplug the jack, her last task, there was a knock at the door. Sissy found it difficult to comprehend her mother's choice in light fixtures, or wallpaper, or carpeting that she would never have to see again but even more difficult to understand was the face that greeted her when she opened the door.

"Hello, Sister."

"In God's name."

He had a size and shape that vaguely resembled her long lost brother, a size and shape she had all but forgotten. And seeing him standing there did little to remind her of the boy she used to know.

Tip Holland had been away fourteen years, long enough to escape the war, see five continents, three oceans, fall in love with the poor, amass a wealth of treasure and culture, hear news of his mother's death, and return a changed man. Of the once slack and grease-haired youth who desired moral retreat, there were now few similarities.

“You’re prettier than I remember,” he told her.

“In God’s name.”

He had replaced sloth and sarcasm with gentleness and grit. His face had brightened, his eyes had grown lively. Each word that came from him was chosen for its candor. His lingo was a blend of Polynesian/Eastern European and his sister surmised from his palms that he had been an ocean-goer. His clothes were tattered, his sandals and his open collar revealed that the smooth skin of his boyhood had been replaced. He had a wild smell, like that of a man who had been surface traveling the world for over a decade, two parts beach, one part train, scoop of desert, pinch of jungle. He had learned to grow a beard, to cradle his sister’s face when he greeted her, to cook with the barest essentials, to use two words instead of three. He began using phrases like “No worries” and calling friends, “good okes” and forever referred to his bathroom as “the lou.” Sissy was amazed to see that his new skills included piano playing, storytelling, and an uncanny ability to mop. All of the destructive boyhood quirks that he had amassed in his youth had been evicted from his character. They sat together, outside as Tipper insisted, for a long cloudless afternoon. Like a child with a big screen hero, Sissy began to fall in love with her brother.

“What have you seen? What have you found?”

“Just what I was looking for.”

Once the waves had settled Tip told her, “There are some friends I’d like you to meet.”

Although empty-handed for souvenirs, Tip Holland brought back six companions from his travels. They followed him like an entourage of the world.

He led his sister to a hotel two blocks away and there in the lobby they greeted her. There was gentle Momma Tom, a mother hen as her name suggested, Doc Zuni - an elderly Persian physician, Padibatakai a kind-hearted crippled girl, Papon - a wild bear of a man from New Guinea, Wonderboy, a tiny African worker who smiled without ceasing, and a huge dog named Putt - a brilliant hunter who had only been with Tipper for the last few weeks of his adventure. During their stay in the hotel they marveled at the luxuries available to them - running water and ice in their glasses but their greatest thrill came when they finally met Tip’s only sibling.

“Let’s sit down a moment,” Tip told her.

Well aware that his life was about to change, Tip hoped that Sissy, the only family he still had, would change with him. So there among his crowd of friends, Tip Holland revealed two things to his sister. He explained that in his travels he had amassed a vast, “Unending fortune. Not a man I know could comprehend it.” He described the family’s new riches, in vague, confident denominations, but gave no clue of its origin. Sissy looked at him with arched eyebrows.

“Secondly,” Tip said, “I’ve returned with the intent of building a life in the mountains, far from here. I have a dream to pursue, sister, and I want you to be a part of it.”

Tip Holland was no longer the kind of man that would lose an audience with empty words. Sissy was captivated by the sheen in his eyes. She wanted to breathe in his determination. A long time passed before she responded to his proposal. What do you say when discovering that you have just inherited a treasure of riches? What do you do when encountering a man with a radiant hope?

The old woman named Momma Tom finally stretched a bony arm across the hickory and said calmly, "Tell her about your dream."

And what began as a vision whispered across the coffee table, turned with the coming years into the mission statement of their lives. Tip had come home boldly, standing for the first time, and Sissy, grateful and inspired, stood beside him. She didn't have a clue what she was in for, but she didn't feel the fright that often comes with change. Her brother had returned home a man and his life was spelled out before her and he wouldn't hesitate to love her, or her him and there was no doubt about whether or not to follow.

"We'll call it Tenpenny," he told her. "Because we're all pennies from Heaven. And 'Ten' because there are ten of us."

The others nodded.

"There are eight of us," Sissy told him, "Only eight."

"Oh yes, Sister, there is something I forgot."

Tipper explained that the present entourage was incomplete. "There are two young boys yet to arrive," he told her. "They belong with us. They just don't know it yet."

"I don't understand. Who are they?"

"Their names are Henry Snow and Jack Oakham. They're very far from here and very far from each other, and they're only small children, but I have to find them."

"Your children?"

"No," he told her. "Not yet."

So what remained of the family's possessions they took with them to their new life. The purchase of land was looked after with care and soon they stood among a meadow, scanning the wood and the stream, the rocky cliffs and the emerald fields with their hands on their hips, imagining what could be.

"It's a good dream, brother."

Tipper pitched a tent and drafted a map of his plan in phases. The ladies left him there with the dog for a week, to begin laying a foundation. He spent his days exploring the terrain, stepping off measurements, building a shelter for his tools. He survived on hares and ptarmigan but left the salmon alone. The others went straight to work felling trees, cutting roads - the Doc designed his infirmary.

For two years they labored, sawed and stacked, hiring a crew of local strongbacks and putting them to the weary. In the evenings they brought ideas to the table at supper, drew up plans after the dishes were done and watched them birth the following morning. Two years and it was started. And no one from the mining flat or the hay town, no one from across the whole of the inlet could understand why Tip Holland had forsaken his lands and decided to build an orphanage.

Henry

They say one man's junk is another man's treasure, and beauty is in the beholder's eye, and don't knock it 'til you've tried it, and all that jazz funk about how there's a star in everyone waiting to be found, a big shining star. And it's all true. Every word of it. "Butterflies" and "cocoons" and "You could do anything with your life". It must be true because stars are born every day, and firemen burn alive to save a stranger, and because

sometimes the future heroes of this world are thrown away as babies.

Henry Snow was dropped in a whicker basket and abandoned cold and hungry on a stone doorstep when he was two months old. His mother fled her home with Henry in tow and journeyed across the ocean to Port Elizabeth, the last place anyone would look. She had hoped that Henry would be raised amidst the color of Africa, with manner and etiquette as priorities. The Nuns at St. Christopher's made sure of it.

“Dear Sisters, The child’s name is Henry Snow. My husband is dead. That is why I must give up my son. Little Henry was born on the 1st of March. Teach him to be proper and give him doctrine. Thank you. – His mother.”

Through the next six years Henry quickly outgrew all of the black orphans that surrounded him, and was soon big-backed and heavy fisted, with hair wild and curly - the bull moose of a one moose litter. His hands were taller than some of the Sisters, with knotty knuckles and a neck that started at the shoulders. And alongside his stature came a flair for finding the weakness in everyone. He knew when the young nuns were menstruating and if his teachers were lying about God.

But more than his skin, or his size, or his keen eye for people, the characteristic that set Henry Snow apart from every other child at St. Christopher's was that he possessed a general awareness of his surroundings even from his early days of speech. The Africa he saw everyday, poetic and undomesticated, made sense to him, as if he had studied her all his life, as did the Catholic Church, with all of her rigid hurdles to clear.

None of the Sisters could comprehend it. A mysterious white boy, abandoned as an infant, who never asked why was he discarded or why his skin was different became a puzzle to them indeed. Henry seemed to know himself early on, right down to his path. He knew that orphanages were necessary until he reached a certain age. He knew that the world was big and he had eyes to see. But what Henry didn't know was that after six years of waiting the world would be seen much sooner than expected.

On a Thursday morning a man traveled by train from Mussel Bay with nothing but a tattered haversack over his shoulder, chewing biltong throughout his journey and shaking with anticipation. When he arrived at the orphanage he removed a tiny spade from his pack and quickly dug a hole behind the northern wall. When he was finished he found a shady spot and began writing the instant he sat.

“Dear son,

I have an image of you and Jack in my head digging up this box and it makes me smile to think of you among the old and bold. This is your second clue. I've buried it here, Henry, so that in your travels you are forced to come back to where you started. That's always important. Kolschen taught me that. The next stage in your journey will lead you to the high cut of the world. Gimmelwald. There you will find a trail leading east to the green river. Follow it to the timber shelter where travelers have etched their words on the walls for decades. Find my words.

Wish I was there – Pops

The man promptly folded the letter, tucked it into a yellow envelope, which he sealed and placed neatly in a small walnut box. He was careful to fill the hole in such a way that any curious children would be unlikely to discover it. Then the man walked

around the outer wall of the shelter, entered through the quad, and wiped his boots on the foot mat as he entered the office.

Sister Katherine looked up at the opening door.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes I have an appointment.”

“Are you here about Henry Snow?”

“I am, Miss.”

She extended her hand, “I am Sister Katherine.”

“Tip Holland.”

“Pleased to have you.”

When Henry was called out of class Tipper watched the way the boy stood, the way his hair grew curly and wild, and for the rest of his life he described the resemblance as “remarkable”.

Once the pair arrived back at Tenpenny, Tip made it clear how the boy should be raised. “Son, you can’t have supper until your hands are dirty and your knees are bleeding.”

And Henry loved the man immediately.

But Sissy couldn’t bear the idea of Tip Holland, a wild man himself, taking full charge of her nephew’s development. By that time Tenpenny was well underway, although only a handful of children were being cared for, the orphanage was already equipped with a working schoolhouse and half a dozen teachers. But unlike all of the other children at Tenpenny, Henry Snow was no longer an orphan. Tipper had seen fit to adopt young Henry as a permanent addition to their family and this led Sissy to assume a certain responsibility for his upbringing. She saw to it that Henry was brought up to be an educated young man, tutored not only in the subjects of science, equations, and letters, but in all manner of social graces as well. Sissy began grooming him as an upstart who could excel at everything. He was made to think that anything could be learned yet that not everything should be learned and that to form an impression of someone as either learned or slow-witted, one must merely find out what he knew, and often more importantly, what he didn’t.

“If someone knows how to butcher an animal,” Sissy told him, “they are certainly not civil. If someone drinks red wine with fish,” she continued, “they are certainly not human.”

In third grade Sissy had Henry study everything he could read, beginning with the great Greeks, then the Germans, and finally his American free thinkers. With his Aunt’s help Henry discovered laws, dogmas, philosophies, myths, religions, goods and evils. There was no limit to his range. One week would end with an exhausting study of carburetor repair and spill over into the next with a romantic interest in cultural geography and ethnic desserts. Instead of eating candy canes and playing baseball Henry Snow soon studied the chemical makeup of red and white food dyes and the force required to launch a successful knuckleball. By the time he was nine, Henry had become pregnant with ideas, fertile with knowledge, and sensitive to sunlight. His father became concerned.

“Let’s take a swim,” Tip told his son.

“Not now, Father. I’ve discovered intercourse.”

“How bout we close that book?”

Although his Aunt discouraged rugged play, behind her back Henry began to indulge in what his father referred to as “the virtue sports” – those endeavors of contest that sent young men into the woods to find their true selves, shining and brave, or dull and ducking. “There is no greater virtue than humility,” his father told him. This was Tip’s greatest contribution to his childhood: the absolute wonder of every single thing. “Look at the stars,” he would tell him, “They will make you humble. As you shoot a bird on the wing, consider the grand miracle of flight. If you can do that you will respect the provision of food that he brings you, and you will respect our Lord and Savior because he has blessed us with this gift.” He often repeated himself. “How better to learn patience than to stalk your prey on a windy afternoon or to tangle your line in the branches at your back? And with these virtues you will find a love for life itself. Can any wisdom be clearer than the kind that grows on trees?” And then he would say to bring his son out of his academic shell, “Sit in those trees, son. Listen to those birds, watch the water. Humility, respect, patience and love. This is what wisdom is made of.”

“Thank you, Daddy.”

It wasn’t long before his father’s teaching began to overtake little Henry Snow. The boy found himself romanced by new sounds and smells. Tenpenny provided a beautiful and wild childhood after all, a childhood that was constantly presented with new possibilities - whether it be horses to ride or cabins to build or new orphans to meet. Henry began to read outdoors, to fall asleep against the giant shade trees. Despite his Aunt’s vigorous adherence to a “pragmatic interest” Henry began to turn his passion for self- improvement and grand depth of knowledge toward the rugged pursuits of youth. Almost overnight it seemed his heart began to be moved by the wind and the rain.

“I’ve decided to become a person of virtue, Aunt Sissy.”

She nodded blankly. “Okay then, honey, after your studies.”

Henry took walks, pictures, liberties. His addiction to answers that was once insatiable had now been cured. The answers were his. He soon journeyed toward a bright, blinding life. He noticed his breathing, how his fingers moved when he told them to, how his toenails grew tirelessly, how his feet stayed on the ground. His mind strayed from the dull and deceitful laws of etiquette and preventative medicine that his Aunt had engraved.

“Have you finished your Scandinavian history?” his Aunt asked.

“It must have slipped my mind.”

Henry Snow decided his true tests were yet to come.

One Sunday evening Tipper packed his bag for a long journey. “I’ll be back in a week,” he told his son. “Do your best to obey your Auntie.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m off to find Jack Oakham.”

“Who’s that?”

“He’ll be your brother, if I ever find him.”

With his father absent Henry felt the tug for the wilderness stronger than ever. Once his Aunt was down for a nap Henry stood with conviction, wrapped an apple, some matches, a jug, and a fish knife in a canvas haversack and marched off to the woods.

He went missing for hours.

Of course Sissy was hysterical. She alerted all hands. On Monday morning she

began her extensive search along the river. She didn't like dogs so she walked without Putt's nose to guide her. She found Henry that morning beneath his homemade thatched roof. He had gathered the sand he needed for a filter. He was pouring it into an old sock when she arrived. "I've spoken to your teachers, Henry. They tell me you are falling behind."

"Hello, Aunt Sissy."

"They tell me you haven't been trying."

"I have been trying."

"Mrs. Boijovski said you failed your nutrition exam."

Henry Snow dropped some small pebbles and pieces of glass into the sock. "I don't care what calories are made of, Auntie. I care what I am made of."

"Come home this minute!"

The next morning Henry Snow went back to his lessons but he could no longer concentrate. The schoolhouse was boring. The straight lines infuriated him. Henry felt that the more he learned, the less he knew. Oh how he wanted to be back in his place among the young.

"I see you're back at your studies," his Aunt said sweetly.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Remember Henry, I'm proud of you. 'The unexamined life is not worth living'."

Humility, respect, patience and love would keep him in his place among the splendid. But the safety of his Aunt's ways was plaguing him.

"Thank you, Auntie."

Yet could he remain dumbfounded? After spending hours in the light could a blind man not remember the colors he had seen? Should Henry Snow lock himself up in a closet and wear gloves and keep his napkin folded neatly, avoiding thorns, brambles, dogs, disease, love, diapers and daylight, or should he sing when knives bled him, girls broke him, and fevers yellowed his resolve? What was he after all, a thing made of soft stuffing, a paper mache hero or the grandest thing in nature, a victorious eagle- a young man?

Until he saw the sunset he couldn't remember the question. But when the colors changed in the west Henry Snow breathed his air again and decided that his youth was too valuable to waste within walls. He would cast aside the benign lessons that bear no fruit and seek out his virtues instead, in the splendor of the field. And so it was. Henry Snow had made a decision, and in doing so, became more of a man than most.

"I've decided to live free, Auntie. Like Thoreau I want to suck out the marrow of life."

"Oh, Henry," she cringed and said slowly, "That's just disgusting."

Gradually he began to sneak away late in the evenings, when his Aunt was off to bed, to build a fire, sleep on leaves, and count the bats. He discovered how to make hackberry butter, to build a sauna, to run a trotline, to mimic eagles. Each morning he would return, unmissed by his Aunt, who assumed he had spent his evenings at his studies. She applauded his efforts as always, thought him a scholar, rubbed his shoulders when he came to dinner. He smiled his suffocated smile.

But no matter how sneaky little Henry was proving to be, when Tipper returned he was immediately wise to his son's plan. He noticed the light that had been bred back

into his son's face, a light that no book could have fueled. He knew his son was seeking wisdom in the rocks and the trees. He looked on with silent admiration.

As the weeks passed Henry became more confident, leaving earlier in the evening and returning later the next morning just in time to dress for his pracks and scribble together his lessons. He couldn't breathe in his home, in the schoolhouse, in the soft places where youth was never tested. He found the intoxicant of the water and the wind to be his nourishment. He struggled everyday to make it through his studies, with only the wilderness as a reward. It became unbearable, yet for a time Henry Snow still moved along the creek, snuck in the back door of one of the orphan cabins, and dressed to depart to the prison of his school out of a forced sense of virtue. The most important lessons had not been lost.

Then on the anniversary of his adoption, when he was asked to conjugate the Latin verb "To live" into all six declensions by a benign Professor who had never been in love, who had never been to war, who had never wetted himself because of laughter, Henry Snow knew he had had enough.

That afternoon he went about his after school routine like always, except instead of waiting until evening to break into the wilderness, Henry tore his clothes off as soon as he got home, exposing his chest to the sun, tearing away the threads like chains. His Aunt began to follow him but could barely comprehend the path he had taken. She found him hours later beneath the same tree as the month before and asked him, "What of your studies?"

"These are my studies." He was making soap from ash and fat.

"You're coming back right this minute, Henry."

"But Auntie as I said-"

"Don't you 'but Auntie'. What about your schooling? What about that?"

"Oh, no no," he chuckled. "That no longer matters."

Her mouth was open.

"The *over-examined* life is not worth living," he told her.

"Oh really? No longer matters? Your schooling no longer matters?!" She looked like a woman whose bloom was fading. She was no longer young. Some pedals were dropping, some had fallen off. "Well let me tell you something, young man!"

"My education is all that matters."

"Come down from that tree!"

Later that day when Henry's father stepped along the creek he noticed Henry beneath the brambles. He stood for a moment to admire the little village that his son had created. He knew deep down that every boy wished for such a creation.

"Henry?"

"Hello, Father." Then, trying to conceal a smile. "How are you, son?"

"I've decided to take a sabbatical, Father. I'll be living out here for awhile."

And before Henry's father turned and left him he said, "I think that would be wise." That evening his father and Auntie got to talking. "He can't do this!" she said.

"He's thinking for himself."

"But we can't let him!"

"Independence is a virtue."

“His mind will go to waste!”

“Whose mind, Sissy?”

She covered her face in her hands, “Whenever you find Jack is this how you plan on raising him, too? As a wild child in the woods?”

“That will depend on Jack.”

She stared blankly. Sadness was coming on. “I couldn’t read until I was twelve,” she said.

“Instead you played in the street, ran through the fountain in the park,” he told her. “You were lucky.”

She looked at him and wondered if that was true. She wondered if maybe he had been right. She wondered if her brother was wiser than she. She wondered if virtue, independence, and simplicity were the answer. Then she came to her senses.

“You’re a crazy man, Tipper!”

After three days without her nephew, Henry’s Aunt was threadbare. She had nothing to do, no one to instruct. Her world had fallen apart. So after careful deliberation she decided to assemble an intervention. She knew the people she could count on.

The panel would consist of Henry’s Aunt, the Tenpenny Doctor, Momma Tom, little Padibatakai and a group of Henry’s schoolteachers. A time was set (before breakfast), a place too (where Henry camped out beneath the brambles) an agenda established, the lawn chairs carried, and the croissants displayed.

As the intervention was about to begin Sissy approached her brother in the hammock. He was holding his nose and looking at his watch, seeing how long he could hold his breath. “I’ve called everyone together,” she said. “I’ve assembled an intervention for poor Henry.”

Her brother nodded. His face was blushing. She looked at him sharply. “I know you probably think it’s a mistake. You think I’m silly. But I’m not silly. You’re silly! Look at you! Everyone is scared to death for your poor boy and you just celebrate like it’s Christmas!”

His cheeks were huge. His face was red.

“You think you’re so smart and cool. You think Henry should grow deeper and not wider. I know what you think. And you know what? I don’t care what you think!”

He let his breath out and looked at his watch. “Yes you do. Two and a half minutes.”

“No I don’t!”

“Then why are you standing there?”

“Please promise you won’t stop us. Please let us help him.”

“I won’t stop you.”

“And you won’t interfere?”

“I won’t interfere. He can decide for himself. I’m going for three minutes. Time me.”

The interveners sat in a circle along the creek and waited for Henry to arrive. Aunt Sissy joined them. They talked about the knee-high bachelor buttons they were expecting, how the pollen was thick, how the rain was constant. They jellied their croissants. It wasn’t long before Henry tiptoed up with a spear.

“Henry!” called little Padibatakai.

Henry's loincloth was wet and he had algae on his belly. "Hello, everyone. I just speared a silver!"

His Aunt launched the boat, "Have a seat, Henry." There was one lawn chair left empty. "We want to help you."

As always Henry smiled back. He looked at the chair strangely and decided to stand. The fish was still flopping on his spear.

"Be humble before us," his Aunt told him.

"Yes, Auntie."

"Say it, please."

"Say what?"

"Say that you will be humble."

"That's absurd."

"Say it, please. Have a seat and say you will listen and be humble before this panel."

"But how can I say it? To say I will be humble would negate the effort to be—"

"Say it! Be humble like me! Be humble like your Auntie!"

Everyone sat blank-faced. The fish was struggling to escape. Aunt Sissy calmed down, closing her eyes. "This is wisdom speaking," she said.

"Listen to yourself, Auntie." Henry then tugged the flopping fish off the spear and laid it on the ground. He pulled an arrowhead from his hip and began to gut it belly up.

"Your school teachers are here," his Aunt said softly. "They came to tell you that you have a great mind. Isn't that right, Mr. Kelvin?"

"You have a great mind, Henry. The finest I've ever seen in gym."

And then Dr. Zuni, "A fine young man."

And the panel, "A son to be proud of."

"See?" his Aunt asked. "Would these people lie? "

Henry sat down and began to fillet his fish. "No," he told her. "I didn't accuse them."

"We are good people, Henry."

"Yes, Aunt Sissy."

"You love us."

"Yes, Aunt Sissy."

"And you will be coming back home."

"No, Auntie. I won't."

Henry's father was watching from a spruce tree, laughing to himself.

Sissy looked at the panel. "You have a great mind, Henry. But there's something wrong with you. You need help."

"There's nothing wrong with me, Auntie."

"Yes there is." Then she smiled and said, "The good news is we've come here to help you. And help you we will. We'll put it to a vote." She cleared her throat, "All those in favor of Henry living out here like an animal, rejecting all of his Aunt's plans and hard work, eating dirty fish, getting sunburned, stung by mosquitoes, and swimming without floaties, say "Aye".

Everyone sat silently, although secretly each of them, because they had once been children, must have wanted to scream.

Aunt Sissy began again. "All those who think Henry should listen to his Aunt

because she loves him dearly and wants only the best for him, say “Aye”.

“Aye.”

Aunt Sissy smiled at her nephew. “You see? The panel has spoken.”

Henry shrugged his shoulders. His face was red with coyote blood. “So? The panel has spoken,” he said.

Henry’s Aunt stood and walked toward her nephew. “You’ll need to bathe quickly and throw away that awful necklace. You can have pancakes and butter before school.”

“I just speared my first silver salmon, Auntie.”

“You may feed it to the dog. It’s good to have you back.”

“I’ll be staying here.”

“Oh, sweetie, I’m sorry. The panel has spoken.”

“They have no authority on the matter.”

“These are your teachers, honey. These are doctors and teachers.”

“I see no reason why that gives them authority.”

She huffed and puffed, “You always talk about respect! Well show some respect!”

“Alright, Aunt Sissy. With all due respect they aren’t very smart.”

“Really?”

“They know a great deal, but they’re not very smart.”

Aunt Sissy shook her head. She looked haggard, shattered. Her poise was a disguise. She waved to the panel, to apologize. “Well, Mister smarty pants,” she said slowly to her nephew, “in your infinite wisdom and virtue how do you define ‘smart’?”

Henry cleared his throat but didn’t take his eyes off the fish. “A smart person; noun – someone who enjoys themselves.”

Aunt Sissy seemed ready to cry. She lifted her hands up to her chin. “My boy. Oh poor boy. Will you forget everything I’ve taught you?”

Henry’s father, still perched in the old spruce tree, was spellbound after he heard his son’s response.

“No I won’t forget, Auntie.” he told her. Then Henry began slowly, “Livaris... libaris...liberis...lius es...lius eras...lius eris...”

Aunt Sissy turned to the panel. Her eyes were red. “What is that?” she asked.

Doc Zuni said it was Latin.

“What’s he saying?”

Henry continued slowly, “Livas.”

“He lives,” said Zuni.

“Libas.”

“He lived.”

“Libis.”

“He will live.”

“Livisti.”

“He has lived.”

“Liveras.”

“He will have lived.”

“Liveris.”

“He would have lived.”

Some three years later, and four thousand miles away, Jack Oakham was hanging his mothers paintings on the walls in front of her, and a few even from the ceiling. As she came awake he closed her curtains so the sun wouldn't throw a glare on the paintings. He wanted her to view all the colors her life had made. In her eyes he could see morphine and fatigue and the knowledge that death only made sense if you've loved something.

"I met a woman once who owned the light," she told him.

"Who was she, Momma?"

"She was an orphan. Like you're about to be."

"No, Momma. I'm not."

She did not intend to torture him. "Remember how I told you of the adventures," she asked. "Across the sea?"

"Yes, Momma."

"I met her there, walking down a road and the light was with her."

His mother seemed to see her. Her dark child eyes looked off past the shaded light to a place she had once known. In that moment if Jack's mother had uttered a word the boy would have expected to hear that strange woman answer.

"Who is she, Momma?"

"She is love."

He ran his fingers through her hair. Her eyes were drooping and her words were whispers but when he ran his fingers through her hair it felt alive and full as he had always known it. "I love you, Momma."

He pressed his face into her hair and said, "I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you," over and over like a song.

He began to cry and her hair, coal-colored, long and rich, glistened with the tears. They beaded down her strands and soaked into her pillow and she rested her eyes as he laid his head against her.

"Judith is her name."

"Judith?"

"But you will call her Momma Tom."

The boy put his hand behind her neck and kissed her forehead. "I will call her?"

"She will be your mother, Jack."

He closed his eyes again. "No. No she won't."

"Promise to do that for me."

"Do what?"

"Find her. Do that?"

"But how will I?"

Carefully she took a single sheet of paper from the bedside table and with her frail fingers Jack's mother sketched a diagram of the journey ahead of him. "There you'll find an angel," she pointed.

Then she took an envelope from the tabletop and an old photograph of her and the woman, both knelt beside a gurney. "Give this to her," she told him.

Jack sat with her a long while, falling asleep with her hands in his. They were a mother and son in the wide ranging sort of love, and as long as he could feel her swelling breath he was safe and nothing would ever change. He was safe and nothing would ever

change. Then sometime in the night she became a memory.

The funeral was small, the benediction rehearsed. In the coming weeks Jack was ushered from one foster family to another: Deritter, Bogalusa, only to settle with a large family in Terrabonne Parrish. He was allowed to bring with him his knapsack, a suitcase, and any items he could squeeze into his underarms. The paintings were left behind. All that remained from his mother were the contents of the envelope she had given him, which he kept on his person at all times.

When he arrived Jack was given a bed in a crowded room that he shared with his five new sisters, two of which were orphans themselves. The house had the smell of stale cigarettes and thirty year old carpet but that hardly mattered to Jack. What he really missed was the confiding presence of someone who loved and listened. In his new life Jack was never cordially spoken to or prayed over and he found it curious that no one offered any explanation of his future. Was he to go on living here forever?

But Jack soon became accustomed to the changes in his life. It wouldn't be fitting to blame anyone for his circumstances, he thought. Momma would want me to endure.

It was summertime and they lived miles from any neighborhood so Jack had his entire day to himself. His foster parents watched in disbelief as the boy busied himself in the yard, pruning the feral garden, raking the leaves from two seasons before. They thought him crazy, or spoiled to work so hard in the wet heat. "I guess our yard ain't good enough for this one," one of the sisters said to mutual agreement.

But what they didn't know was that throughout his life, Jack Oakham consistently sought out intensive labor. He did so on one hand because not a bone in his body was made for idleness, but the real reason was that when his body was set to a mindless task, his mind was free to pay his mother a visit. And it was to this ultimate purpose that Jack worked from breakfast to suppertime in his new home. It gave him hours to contemplate the only things that mattered to Jack Oakham: his mother, and the promise he had made the day she died. Young Jack thought constantly about how he would set about his journey. Though he didn't have a clue where he would begin. But every time he began to worry he quickly changed his mind. She wouldn't want me to be anxious, he thought. The answer will come.

A month went by. Jack worked all day, never altering his routine until eventually he began to long for something new to read or someone new to talk to. And then, as if his mother was listening, he was given both. One afternoon, along with his daily lemonade, his foster mother handed him a letter. It was unopened, having arrived that afternoon. Overwhelmed with curiosity he rushed into his room and was careful as he removed it.

Dear Jack,

I hope you don't mind me tracking you down. You see I've been looking for you a long time and I've only just found you. We've never met but there's a great deal for us to talk about. I come from a place very different from any place you've ever seen. And there's a spot here for you. A good spot, at the head of the table, if you want it. I know that Momma Tom would love to see you. You know that name, don't you? There's a return address on the envelope. I'll be hoping to hear news of you soon.

Your Friend.

Jack sat deeply confused. There was no signature. He reread it again and again looking for more clues but finding none. He read the address and matched it with the map his mother had given him. All afternoon he pondered what to do.

The following evening Jack's new family traveled to the nearest town with a shopping mall for dinner and a movie. It was the first time he had been out in the world in over a month, and his eyes were hungry for newness.

As they waited on their showtime the family slipped into a bookstore and Jack was quick to find the travel section. He had always been drawn to the wild reaches of the world and to his delight a photo book of continental wildlife was open before him. He flipped through the big colorful pages and stopped when he saw what the insert called "Moose" swimming across a river. Jack had never seen a moose before. He looked wide-eyed at the bears feeding at the river's edge and the lone caribou along the prairie bottom. When he followed his foster family into the theatre all he could think of were wild places.

When Jack told this story to children years later he could never recall what film they were going to see that evening or where they had their meal. All he did remember was that one of the previews played beforehand was a tale called "The Journey of Nattie Gann", the story of a girl who went on a journey to find her father.

She looked brave on the screen and true and Jack had missed those feelings that his mother had given him. He knew that he wouldn't have them again in this new life. Adventure was elsewhere.

And Jack would tell the children that if that preview hadn't played, or if he'd been in the line for popcorn, or if he hadn't just flipped through the photos and seen the great caribou crossing the tundra, he never would have offered to get a drink for his foster father, never would have slipped past the box office and into the parking lot and found the hide-a-key beneath the hitch, never would have confiscated the \$350 emergency fund that his foster father kept stashed beneath the floor mat, never would have made his way to the town center and forged a parental consent form in eligible cursive. If that preview hadn't played and his mind hadn't accelerated past the stale bread and the faucet that dripped through the night, and his foster sister's smelly feet, he never would have dreamed of buying a bus ticket. All he had with him were the clothes he was wearing, his knapsack that contained a spare shirt and a few books, an empty bottle, and the money that he hid in his shoes. But he was undaunted. His journey awaited him. On the way to the station all Jack could think on was the old woman's face and the places that surrounded it.

"Would you please have a map?" he asked the man behind the counter. Jack studied the routes for twenty minutes before returning.

"Yes Sir?" the man asked.

Jack pointed at the map. "How much does it cost for me to go to *there*?"

"How old are you?"

"Eleven. I have a note."

"A hundred and twenty."

Jack hesitated. The point of no return. Finally he said, "I'd like one."

He survived on chocolate bars and train coffee and made a habit of sitting beside

the largest woman he could find to make himself appear cared for to the other passengers, and to himself. The landscape became his hobby. He watched pines turn to cedars, cedars to mesquites, the Estacado open into a wasteland and close up again as he passed to the east of the Cristos. The cliffs rose out of the sands and when he saw the desert lake he thought it was the sea. The mountains made him feel small and free. He bathed using handfuls of sink water in the stations and saw the ocean for the first time on the third day.

When he arrived at his destination he ate oysters the size of eggs, eighteen of them altogether, stuffed crackers into his pockets along with a stack of napkins and paid the bill, tipping ten percent on instinct. He watched seals basking at dock's end, took his shoes and socks off and ran through the fountain and played hide and seek with children in the park. It didn't take him long to discover that the men and women in the lobbies of hotels have the skinny on everything: each restroom, market, ferry station.

It was a two day wait for the ship to disembark. Jack slept in the park, folding his shirt around his stack of napkins to make a pillow. At one point he entered the Palacio Hotel from the service entrance, took the stairs to the second floor and walked the hall to the main elevator which he rode down to the lobby, but as he approached the front desk and began to request extra soap for his father, he chickened out. Because he was too afraid to lie Jack bathed himself in the river with nothing but the murky water.

On the day that the ferry was to disembark Jack was seated in the shade at the end of a long belt of rose bushes. He had devoured a ripe apple for breakfast that he had found at the market, along with some juice and banana bread that he was nibbling on.

"Don't you have a home to go to?"

Jack was startled. The voice had come from the trees. A young man leaned against the elm beside him and when he saw that the face meant him no harm he answered, "That's where I'm going," he said.

"All by yourself?"

"I'm going to find my new mother."

"Your new mother?"

"Yessir, that's right. A fresh start."

"I can see it in your face - you want her to love you?"

"No sir, I don't think it matters who loves me. It only matters who I love. I can't go round controlling what other people like all the time. I got my hands full just loving them."

And without another word the man was gone, weighing his wisdom against that of a boy.

On the ferry Jack slept in the lounge, twice was woken and asked, "Do your parents know you're here?"

"I'm certain that they don't," and moved to another part of the ship.

Jack enjoyed the water slapping the bow and the fancy waiters with their trays. The first evening he made six trips to the midnight buffet, vomited off the deck, which he later admitted was tons of fun, and after composing himself fixed two more plates of shrimp. He spent most of his hours in the library where he split his time examining maps of his destination and crying quietly. When the ship made berth he only had to wait two hours for the next ferry up the coast. Yet when he boarded he took his shoes off and emptied his pockets on the main deck and discovered that he was down to his last ten dollar bill. He fell asleep in the parlor with a sad, guilt-ridden face, imagining his foster

father still waiting in the theatre for his drink.

Green mountains crawled out of the sea and drifting at their shores were pale blue islands of ice, wafting with the tide. The land seemed to know what it was. It called to young Oakham, "Your life has been minor until now. Your eyes have been closed." Gurgling water sounded as the glaciated pieces crashed into the sea. Jack dreamed that his old troubles had let him go.

When he awoke a crowd was lined up against the glass facing the open sea. Jack stood from his chair and made his way to the window. For a moment there was nothing and then with a unanimous breath from the passengers, a giant eruption from the water. The whale breached and crashed and disappeared.

Once he reached the portage town, Jack Oakham walked into the general store and took several small red packets from the bin into his cold hands. In the lavatory he filled his bottle with steaming water. After letting his hands warm he peeled open the packets and squeezed them in. A police officer saw him shaking up the bottle and drinking it in the lot.

"You know that boy?" he asked the clerk.

"Never seen him."

The officer found Jack huddled in the alley.

"What do you have there?"

Jack was frightened and didn't even know why. "Bottle."

"Cold hands?"

Jack looked down at the bottleneck. It was steaming.

"I was hungry."

"You're not in trouble, son. This isn't the first time I've seen poor man's tomato soup."

Jack had never been called "son", not even by his mother. She preferred "sweetheart". When he heard the man say it he began to cry.

The officer, whose name Jack would never learn though he tried to discover it years later, passed him a handkerchief. In exchange young Oakham handed the man the folded photograph that was creased in his back pocket. When he could speak he asked, "Do you know her?"

The man turned the old photograph with his fingers. His face relaxed, "I do, son."

"I'd like to meet her."

Jack explained that he had taken the road as far as he could. That he was near to the woman's home, but that the last leg was a mystery. "I don't know where to find her," he said. "I don't know where to go. All I have is a name and no maps show it anywhere and-" but before he could finish the man said, "I'll take you."

Morning broke as they traveled the hills. The officer gave him a pillow and Jack slept against the window. He missed the brilliant colors that the sun shed on the ocean arm but would see them many times as the years went by. He awoke with a bump as they arrived at the gate - two burlled pine pillars.

An old man came out of the gatehouse and nodded to the officer who stepped out of the car. Jack watched as the two stood whispering near the gate.

Finally the man came over to the door. "How did you hear about this place, son?"

"My mother told me."

"Your mother huh?"

“Yessir.”

“Well I’m sorry but we don’t take walk-ins. Unless you have papers there’s nothing I can do.”

Jack looked down at his hands. He waited and waited and the two men watched his eyes water. Then he slowly reached into his pocket and took out the envelope with the note inside. “Could you give this,” he asked, “to the woman?”

“What woman?”

“Momma Tom.”

“Sure. Sure I can do that.”

And as the officer was climbing back into the car the gateman said, “But who shall I say gave it to her?”

“Jack.”

The old man looked sharply at the boy. “Jack? Jack Oakham?”

Jack was clearly frightened. “Yes.”

The gateman opened the door. “Son, you should learn to introduce yourself.”

Beyond the gate the old man pointed Jack up a dirt trail and into the forest of Tenpenny. There the trail wound through timber and tamaracks, always climbing, and beyond the bog where the choke cherry shrubs sprouted freely. He crossed over a small bridge as his feet trembled from the shaking grooves in the bridge-boards, and up the dale where his hands shook in the sun. A stone walkway had been cobbled perfectly into the wet emerald grass and meandered through the thick wood. It must have taken years to lay these stones, Jack thought, as he walked across them, trying not to let his feet touch the sprouts between the cobbled pieces.

The deep woods opened revealing a bend in the road and as he stepped out into the meadow the wind settled and Jack Oakham could hear the gentle roar of a river, somewhere beyond the trees. He took the bend and observed before him a huge log home, piney wood stacked high, the chipped bark flaking off, the chirping of laughter, the still-wet grass from the evening rain, and a huge dog on the lawn.

The scent of flatcakes filled the yard under the morning, so heavy that Jack smelled it as he huffed, climbing past the hemlocks and the timber hut that he would someday learn housed the mice in winter.

Putt awoke, picking up a ball and bringing it over, as if to say, “It’s about time.” and in doing so began one of Jack’s fondest friendships. As he rubbed the dog’s head young Oakham became aware of the sharp, almost frightening knowledge that he had not touched another living thing in over a week of travel. His elbows had bumped the fat women he sat beside but his hands he had kept to himself. He passed Putt’s face from palm to palm, reminded of how fine a thing it is to share the world with others.

He heard laughter again and took long steps up the hill. Putt followed him across the lawn to the cabin, around the piney logs and both turned the corner to the porch. From the screen door the moist aroma of an unspecified taffy batter filled the deck. By the French windows a marvelous rack of delicate ground cinnamon chocolates mixed with the fragrance of baking coffee fruits sat, and with it came an understood awe from the boy. Nutmeg nuts and cocoa nuts, and sweet layered chocolate folded in a circle like a bonbon cake lay covered by the windowsill with wax paper. Jack saw a little girl plop a golden honey-malt fritter into her mouth through the window. He could see beside her, a little oriental boy, standing on his toes, his hands on the countertop above him, hoping to

see what the big children were mixing.

A bell chimed from the valley. It rang and each child, young and old put down what they were doing and rushed out to the porch. Jack watched them through the window and, curious, peaked his head around the corner.

From that porch Jack could see a whole new world laying out before him. A wonderland. The river valley accounted for all the colors he had ever known. The cottonwoods were filled with tree-houses and pulleys, cables strung between them. Riverside a long stretch of lanes and sandpits, monkey bars and two ziplines stretched between the towers. From one giant tree a rope had been fastened high in the branches that hung down to a platform at the first fat limbs. To Jack's surprise, the whole troop of children on the porch began singing:

*“We children cheer, It's Saturday! It's Saturday! Hooray! Hooray!
Can Johnny Appleseed come out to play?”
We waited through the week to reach today,
We waited in our beds at night for such a holiday,
And now we cheer, It's Saturday! It's Saturday! Hooray!
We sat at our desks for five long days,
Can Johnny Appleseed come out to play?”*

The morning was fresh. The light brought a halo to the grass top and the early fog spread itself thinly across the valley that echoed the calls of the children. “Johnny Appleseed!”

Out of the shaded wood a figure came. One strong boy, who seemed to be their leader, a curly-haired youngster, tanned and ruddy-faced, with a bandana around his big head, and armlets tied on, appeared from beneath the shade trees. Voices rallied from the porch, “Hooray! Hooray! He's come out to play!”

The boy king reached the center of the field and gave his crowd a bow. When they roared again he said to them, loud and bold,

*“Oh, The Lord is good to me! And so I thank the Lord,
For giving me, the things I need, the sun and the rain and the appleseed.
The Lord is good to me!”*

With long steps the boy bounded across the field, and scaled the big tree like an ape. It appeared to Jack that this was something the boy had done many times before. When he reached the platform he spit into his palms and rubbed them together. The children were silent as the boy sprung off the limb into the air. Catching the rope he swung once out, once back, and the crowd was open-eyed as he came high with the sway, let go above the pool, tucked his hands behind his head, like he was napping in mid air, and crashed into the river.

“Hooray!” The children jeered from the porch and all at once they dashed down the steps to the valley. The fireweed and the strawberry stems fell upon themselves from the passing wind. The children scurried across the field, the little ones trailing behind and all flung themselves into the river.

Jack smiled to himself and turned the corner.

A huge table stretched across the porch. A few adults were taking plates and cups off to the kitchen to be washed. There was a humming among them, a quiet tune playing from their lips. "It's Saturday, It's Saturday! Hooray! Hooray!" All of the servers were wearing aprons with painted handprints on them and the word "Tenpenny" across the top.

Beyond them, on a swing worn smooth at the seat, sat an elderly woman. Her skin was like aged raisins. She was no older than in Jack's photograph. Her copper face had hard scars across her cheek. Jack had never seen a woman so old with long hair before. In her arms was a babe.

He stood at the porch edge, his eyes following the movement of the children down below, the servers cleaning up breakfast, the woman rocking at the far end. It was a full minute before anyone noticed him.

But as he was stacking plates, a man with profound dimples and deep-set eyes noticed that Jack Oakham had arrived. The man gave Jack a curious look, like he had seen him somewhere before. He set the dishes down on the table. The man then cradled his face in his palms. His eyes hopped around. "Hello," he said.

Jack trembled. "Hello."

"What's she doing?" Jack asked looking across the porch.

Tip tightened his eyes to keep the tears from spilling out. "She's praying."

Jack drew a deep breath, "I've taken up praying myself."

Tip spoke in a whisper, the way he liked to speak when he had something strong to say. He would later repeat the tale at large events of how the first words of instruction he ever gave to young Oakham were, "Come, follow me," and that he wouldn't trade them for all the biltong in the world.

As they passed among the servants scurrying about the table, Jack watched the old woman with her head down. For some reason Jack found it easy to walk toward her. His hand trembled as he held the woman's face, kissed the crown of her head, her coal-colored hair.

There were whispers among the kitchen staff. Doc Zuni came onto the porch and moved quickly up to Tipper. "I just got off the two way radio. Is it true? Is that him?"

Tip watched the boy in disbelief. "Yeah. I guess that's him. I was supposed to bring him back. But instead he found us."

The Doc shook his head. "Finally here."

"Finally," Tip echoed. "Five years and just like that the wait is over."

The children were loud as they splashed across the river. The kitchen staff watched silently as the scene unfolded.

"Well, you finally have them both," Doc said. "What will you do now?"

"Raise them together," Tip told him.

"Yes, yes. That was the plan, wasn't it?"

But Tipper seemed not to hear. His eyes were ranging far, through the great branches that cradled the porch and down into the valley where the far off shadowed stream ran to the sea. It was silver and silent and full of second chances.

Part I

The Tenpenny Three

On rare occasions, in remote parts of the world, boys grow into men. For both Henry and Jack it had been an adolescence of freedom and discipline, rough-housing and rigidity, where competition was valued greatly, but character was prized. The highest calling of Tip Holland's life was to ensure that his two adopted sons not only reached manhood, but that they became fully burdened with their role as the gentle warriors Tip had trained them to be.

And by the time he had spent several years raising them together - on the day that the bulk of our story begins, Tip Holland felt confident that he had come dangerously close with one of them.

1992

1. Change is in the Air

When Jack Oakham came out onto the porch the old dog was lapping up the frost from a frozen puddle of hot chocolate. It wasn't a big puddle, probably just what was left at the bottom of the mug when the wind blew it over. But it was big enough to stain the porch rungs that Jack had painted. There were half a dozen mugs on the porch, some on their sides, with the stains of chocolate puddles frozen to the wood. Beside the puddles the pit fire had fizzled in the night and only the coals were glowing in the windburn. Jack could see half a dozen roasting sticks with blackened ends tilted against the pit. Some of the older kids had probably been talking late when the bugle sounded, Jack thought. From the looks of it, Putt, his old dog, had only just discovered the puddle.

"Putt, you know better than to eat chocolate," Jack said. "Even a little makes you gassy."

The old dog licked his chops and looked up at Jack nonchalantly with eyes that seemed to say, "And you know better than to think I mind the gas," as he went back to his licking.

Jack smiled, "Now we all have to suffer," as he closed the door behind him. He stepped out into the cold morning and walked over to the wood wagon and peering inside saw that the bunkhouse stock was getting low. There were wood wagons beside every cabin at Tenpenny and now that spring was coming on all of their wood stocks were dwindling. What frustrated Jack the most was that he blamed himself. With the early snows that winter Jack and his lazy brother Henry hadn't gathered as much wood fuel as Jack would have liked, or as their father had expected. Their wood shortage was a problem he had anticipated all winter. Jack thought the situation over in his head as he watched the sun peek over the eastern slopes and went on to gather a wood stack from the wagon. He thought of the younger children, and of Momma Tom as he continued to remind himself, "Spring is coming, spring is coming."

Of course spring in Tenpenny took a long time to come but when it did come it was well worth the wait. The children rejoiced as the snows thawed, the trees bloomed, but in the meantime their lives were cold and wet. The winter that year had been the hardest of the five that Jack had spent in Tenpenny, and the longest. There were several weeks when the children, who numbered over one hundred and fifty, spent days on end within the four walls of their cabins huddled near a fire, hearing stories, learning to read and write, and eating what meals could be brought from the dining hall in the blizzard. But now there had been no snowfall for over a week and the children were becoming anxious. The sun had come out for three days straight and the porches had thawed, as had the gravel walkways between the cabins, and the afternoon before the icicles that had been growing all winter began to drip and the older children watched with anticipation.

As the sun rose the light hit the peaks first, which were snowcapped year round and then spilled over into the distant hills and the black forest called the Wild West End and the long barren valley that connected it to Tenpenny Hill. Jack looked out upon the

west as he carried the wood to the fire pit. He knew that by the time the sun rose high enough out of the trees for the rooftops to catch the light his Aunt Sissy would have collected her thoughts from the evening before and would come storming up the road to have a word with Henry. In the years that Jack had spent at Tenpenny there were only a few things he could depend on day to day. Orphanages are filled with orphans, and orphan problems. Jack often asked himself what could be more complex than a family with one hundred and fifty children who for much of their lives had had no family. His chores had taught him much but their stories had taught him everything. Not one of the children's tales was the same and not one day alongside them like another. Yet there were elements of his day that resembled other days. When he thought about it, and he thought about it whenever he could, he was able to identify only four constants in his life: Momma Tom's love, his father's wisdom, Putt's friendship, and the Biblical struggle between his Aunt and his brother.

Jack Oakham was an orphan in the more visceral sense than Henry, for he had lost his mother, unlike Henry who had grown up without one. In Tenpenny those who are born without families are secretly referred to by the children as "Orphan Born" while those who lost their families are known as "Orphan Grown". Those few who had actually witnessed the death of their parents are the "Orphan Pure" and are highly regarded. Jack being the eldest of the orphan pure needed his mother more and more as he grew into a man and Momma Tom, as promised, had become his mother and her love was constant.

Jack's adopted father, Tip, the first true father he had ever known, had become his pillar for knowledge. As much as Tipper loved his son, it wasn't Tipper's love Jack desired so much as his wisdom. Jack Oakham would always have a hole in his heart in the shape of his real father, a man he had never known, and no amount of Tipper's love could cause his desire to rest.

The one place Jack did rest, however, was with Putt. Soon after his long journey to Tenpenny Jack had discovered that the kind of friend he desired to have, and the kind of friend he desired to be was one who wasn't nosy, was always loyal, and could be trusted. This law was never broken between the two.

And though some days the goings-on at Tenpenny allowed for momentary breaks in the chaos, the only other rule outside of his own relationships that Jack could depend on was that Henry and his Aunt Sissy, by days end, would infuriate each other. The evening before had proved no exception.

Putt had happily disregarded Jack's command to leave the chocolate alone and after warming the patch with his tongue had begun to clean the stain from the decking. Jack set the firewood in the pit, and stirred the coals with a one of the roasting sticks before collecting the rest and stacking them in the wagon. He moved the chairs back into place along the porch and gathered the mugs and went inside to wash them. When he stepped through the door the new light from the eastern windows revealed that Henry's bed was empty.

The cabin was nothing more than a tiny hovel that Henry and Jack and their father had built themselves, with a bunk bed, crude wall shelves, and a collection of boy mess strewn about the single room. In many ways their cabin was inferior to the children's cabins down the road, but this cabin was seen as a sacred dwelling for it was where Henry Snow and Jack Oakham lived, the boy kings of Tenpenny.

The other children on the hill didn't know why Tipper had chosen to adopt these

two young men as brothers, for that matter neither did Henry and Jack, but it didn't seem to bother the children in the least. These two "brothers", who shared no physical similarities, were both adored by the orphans of Tenpenny, who followed their every move.

Upon seeing that his brother's bed was empty, Jack ducked to look beneath the bed because Henry had a habit of rolling out and sleeping on the stone floor. But he hadn't this morning. From what Jack could see Henry had risen well before dawn, dressed himself in his heavy coveralls, which had been hanging on a wall peg, and had left with a few loose floor items for the room looked bare compared with the night before. Jack washed the mugs and moved back onto the porch.

"How's the chocolate?" Jack asked.

Putt was finishing the last and didn't reply.

Jack looked east at the sun and the light filling Tenpenny. He looked down the river valley at the cabins and watched for any children rushing out in the cold to use the latrines. The first time his eyes swept over the stables he failed to notice anything unusual but the next time he saw that the two horses he had stabled the night before were missing. He peered inside the cabin to confirm that Henry had taken his bridle and quirt with him. He had in fact.

"You see Henry duck out this morning?" Jack asked the dog.

Putt looked up, but not at Jack. He faced down the road and seemed to give a half snarl that Oakham found amusing when he saw who it was aimed at.

"Morning Sissy," Jack said.

"You still talk to that dog? I'd think you'd have more respect for yourself than to talk to that dog."

"That dog or any dog?"

"Well any dog, but that dog in particular."

"Careful Sissy. My bad side is narrow. Guess I don't need to wonder who you're hunting."

"Is he dressed?"

"I suppose he is."

"Well call him out."

"I'd be happy to but he's already been called out by somethin' else. He left before dawn."

"Where to?"

"He didn't say."

"Well that doesn't sound like Henry."

"No ma'am."

"You got any ideas?"

"Well I don't play favorites with people, Aunt Sissy. Just dogs. So what I can tell you is that two horses are missing and that whatever you have to say to Henry, I'm sure he won't run from hearing. You can expect him soon enough."

"You don't play favorites with people, Jack?"

Jack shook his head.

"Well I know the names of two young ladies who would have a thing or two to say about that."

Jack tightened up and looked down at the snow. She held him in her look and

wouldn't let him leave. When it came to matters of the heart Sissy was well known for setting her verbal traps and leaving them until her prey had squirmed a little.

"Do you need any help this morning?" Jack asked her.

She looked satisfied when she said, "No, but the maintenance crew needs a snow shovel. Fetch 'em a shovel and fetch your brother when you see him."

"Yes ma'am."

As was her custom Sissy left without so much as a nod, but did so in an acceptable, almost gentle way. Jack watched her down the road hoping she would avoid the black ice, which she did. He scanned the hills and the riverbed for his brother and the horses again before he rubbed the ears of that old dog.

"Let's see if we can't dig up a snow shovel, eh Putt?"

And the old dog arched his back.

Jack Oakham was rarely hungry in the mornings. He customarily took his breakfasts while working and they were never more than a biscuit or a slice of fruit from the dining hall. But that morning he had awoken hungry as soon as his feet hit the cold stones. He could smell the flatcakes from his porch and even stronger as he walked down the icy road. Jack carried the belief that smells travel best in the mornings, as do memories, and he rarely missed an opportunity to reflect upon his life in the quiet early hours. In that way Jack was much like Tip. They both enjoyed many of the same quiet pursuits but the one they had most in common was reflection. In fact reflection was the only one of Tip's "Five Romantic Virtues" that Jack Oakham ever practiced. It was often said of Jack that he was "born practical and lived to work". He made little time for theory, but instead busied himself with the hands-on struggles of life.

On the other hand reflection was the only virtue on Tip's list that Jack's brother, Henry Snow, didn't practice. "Where I've been doesn't mean a thing compared to where I'm going," Henry once said, before rambling incoherently. He could never justify time spent on the past and he refused to engage those who tried to take him there.

Henry spent all of his time on the rest of Tipper's list: laughter, adventure, appetite and pursuit, yet chose not to reflect on any of them.

Jack was reflecting on his mother and her long dark hair as he walked beside Putt down the road. It was commonly where his day began. It was unusual for his mind to stay there for very long, however. Either he got lost trying to pick out old memories from long ago or he was distracted by his surroundings and his mind drifted to other things. At that moment his mind was drifting towards breakfast. Not only could he smell the flatcakes growing closer with every step but now the scent of cheesy grits and coffee cake came on as well. Putt was moaning and chewing on Jack's coveralls, nudging him towards the aroma.

"You already had breakfast," Jack told Putt. "I'd be a dirty dog if you think I'd let you have chocolate *and* pancakes."

Putt let go Jack's pant leg as if offended, "I don't keep company with dirty dogs," Jack heard him say.

The trees that had drooped with the weight of the snows since the onset of winter were extending their arms out that morning as the sun hit them. Above him the treehouses and rope bridges that had been abandoned these five months seemed to call down to Jack to sweep them clean and invite the children back up into their boughs. He looked the lots

over and thought of a young girl he had promised to take riding once the winter broke as he continued to remind himself, “Spring is coming.”

Jack stepped off the road and started for the tool house but he wasn't certain the shovel would be there. The afternoon before Henry had taught a pair of Burmese “Henry Snow wannabe's” how to snow shovel race down the slopes at Campbell Field, which had the best grade for racing on Tenpenny hill. Four years earlier Jack and Henry had raced down those very slopes when they were twelve. They had walked away unscathed but the pair of wannabe's had not been so lucky. One of them was knocked out cold and the other lost a little blood. Probably lost the shovels too if I had my guess, Jack thought, as he walked up the path to the tool house.

II.

Momma Tom lived in the heart of Tenpenny in a cabin tucked away in a pocket clearing in the trees. The cabin had once been used to stable the horses before Tip had built the lots surrounding it, but now it was enclosed, with a dusty plank floor, two small beds, a pot-bellied stove, a rocker and a ceiling lantern that gave the only light. When the room was fully lit one could still see the wood scars on the walls where the manger had been pried away.

The room itself was surprisingly warm, even in the cold months, because, as Tip said, the inhabitant was always close to God, and God is never cold. Although she knew better than to argue God with her brother, Sissy suggested that the warmth of the room was a result of the thick timbers and the shortage of windows, being that only a single porthole overlooked the lots, instead of the spiritual temperature of Momma Tom, the old woman who lived there.

Although a practical man, Tip Holland was never one to leave God out of blessing. He suggested to his sister that every good thing comes from somewhere, and it was his belief that it wasn't from thick pine and windowless dwellings.

“Or from the hearts of men,” Sissy had said. To which he agreed.

Regardless of the reasons, the small cabin was the warmest room on Tenpenny Hill, making it a fine place for Momma Tom to tell stories to children who longed to forget the winter.

Momma Tom lived alone, but at the time that our story begins she was sharing her space with two young orphans of Tenpenny. She was up well before sunrise with one tattered quilt draped across her shoulders and another wrapped tight around the foal that she was suckling. She had kept her fire going through the night as she gently rocked the foal, which was so small and fragile had it not been for the small white tongue that stirred when Momma Tom fed him, she would have thought he was dead already. Half the reason Momma Tom was feeding him was to see any sign of life because most of the milk was dribbling down the foal's neck anyway. The bottle wasn't made for horses.

Ain't that the way of it, Momma Tom thought. Tenpenny is so full of things used for reasons other than they was made for. Whether it be bottles or people. No matter what it be. So many jobs to do and so few folks to do 'em. But not me, she thought. No that's not my story. Momma Tom is right where she needs to be.

Wonderboy, the top hand on Tenpenny Hill, had found the dead mare two evenings before in the lots and he and Tipper had been quick to cut the foal out of the womb. They had brought a barren mare into the stable to lick away the afterbirth and given the foal over to Momma Tom, knowing that if anything was ever orphaned, Momma Tom would want it.

“Don’t fumble it like a pigskin,” she had told them. “Momma Tom always says carry an early foal like you’d carry a bucket of runny dynamite. There, there now.”

She took the foal without surprise at his appearance and wrapped him in her skirts and rocked him all that morning. When they arrived she said to Henry and Jack, “No matter how strong you become in your own eyes you’re blind and helpless to God. Just like this little one.”

“He loves blind or not,” Henry said, surprising everyone.

At first the foal had been the source of great excitement among the children. Once the news had spread across Tenpenny they came running to the stables to catch a glimpse of the newborn. Those orphans who hadn’t been at Tenpenny for long had heard that a foal could walk as soon as it was born and they were disappointed to see that this wasn’t the case. The mare was licking the foal, which looked more like a rubber fetus than a colt, and who had shown no signs of life except a gentle breathing.

Jack and Wonderboy pulled a tarp from the stable bin to cover up the rotting mother, whose entrails were frozen to the ground, but Jack knew even the little orphans of Tenpenny were much accustomed to the knowledge of life and death.

But Henry was more apprehensive. “They shouldn’t stay,” he had whispered to his father. “If the foal dies the spring will be off to a bad start. We’ll be doing damage control.”

Tipper knew that the foal had little chance, but he understood the value of teaching the hard lessons early. “They’ll stay, Henry. If he dies there will be lessons in that but if he lives the spring will teach them other things.”

So the children had crowded in the doorway, waiting for the young colt to stand, or even open his eyes, but it didn’t happen. The foal appeared lifeless in Momma Tom’s arms, his breathing was so slight. Many of the children began to fear that he was too premature to survive the cold, that if he had come a few days later he may have had a chance. But Momma Tom was quick to say, “Spring’s a comin’. You hear? Look out there. Soon you’ll see ‘em grasses sprout out all over the wide world and I tell you what’ll come then; Life. Life is on its way. This stallion’ll gallop ‘em grasses.”

But her words hadn’t roused the foal. Now the young colt had been motionless in Momma Tom’s arms for two sleepless nights and the children became disenchanted. After giving up hope for a dramatic awakening or a sudden death each of the children had drifted back to their cabins, and soon their minds became fixed on other things.

The only orphan who had stayed was a crippled girl named Padibatakai. She was sleeping in Momma Tom’s spare bed beside the rocker and Momma Tom was watching her with the eyes of a mother. The girl had waited patiently through the first night, watching for any signs of life, and she had sat with Momma Tom the next day and finally fell asleep. One of the fundamental differences between Padibatakai and the other children of Tenpenny was that she seemed impossible to discourage. It meant nothing to her that the foal hadn’t stirred. She knew that healing was a lengthy process and one she intended to endure.

So now Momma Tom had two orphans in her keep, and it was the happiest she had been in a very long time. Because she had lost her own children, and now she was quite old, Momma Tom cherished any chance she could get to feel like a mother.

“You hear that?” Padibatakal whispered.

“Hear what, Mumsie?”

They were as two shadows whispering in the dark.

“I heard something out there.”

As Momma Tom was suckling the foal in the dark of the morning, Padibatakal sat up in the bed beside her.

Now both of them could hear a recurring sound coming from the lots. Padibatakal pulled the covers back and sat up on her knees and shyly she peered out the tiny window into the darkness.

“Don’t you hear it?” the girl asked.

But Momma Tom didn’t answer. She was looking down at the girl’s bare legs. An inch below the ankle both of Padibatakal’s legs rounded into a nub where her feet should have started. In the past the girl had always been careful to keep her legs covered with long winter socks, even in the summer. She must have grown too warm in her sleep and stripped them, thought Momma Tom, as she noticed the socks draped across the sheet. Momma Tom eyed the girl’s ankles briefly, having never seen them. “Yes I hear it,” she said. “But I can’t say what it is.”

Just then Padibatakal felt a cold shudder and she quickly slipped her legs back beneath the blankets, blushing shyly as Momma Tom pretended not to notice.

When she was very young, before Tipper had brought her to Tenpenny, Padibatakal had lost both of her feet. But despite her rough start she proved to be one of the happiest children Tip had met in his travels. He could see that she was strong and he liked having projects – so long as they were human projects and the two soon found their way back to Tenpenny.

It had taken many years but Padibatakal no longer felt self-pity toward the fact that she was forced to live without feet. Her joys were found in the races she could still run. Of course at first the transition to a place like Tenpenny had been very difficult, despite the standard of living that she now enjoyed. Tenpenny was a place of freedom, and she had been a childhood stranger to freedom. Unlike the children of her homeland, the orphans of Tenpenny enjoyed sports and games of the field every day. When she was a child she would spend whole days alone in the quiet of her bunk thinking long on the wild freedoms of Tenpenny that she had been denied. When she was blue she often thought of things that would bring her out of it, and when she thought of horses, she liked them most of all.

For horses were a way at freedom and freedom was what she wanted most. She wanted to have her own horse and her own saddle to polish. She wanted to stomp around and race her friends and discover the colors beyond the trees. More than anything Padibatakal was born to venture, more perhaps than Henry with his wild ramblings, more than even Tipper could dream. And the sum total of her ventures were consumed in a place she had never seen called the Wild West End.

It was a rumor known throughout Tenpenny and the towns along the inlet that Tip Holland had long ago buried a treasure beyond the deep forest called the Wild West End. Tenpenny legend said that he had buried it high in the mountains and that it would

someday be recovered. Padibatakakal had thought about the treasure for many years, of where it came from, of why Tipper had buried it, and most often of who would someday dig it up. No one but Tip knew what kind of treasure it was or where it had been laid to rest. All that was known from years of eavesdropping was that far to the west Tip had left a chest for someone to find in the great unknown wilderness, beyond Lah Shakes Lake. Some believed that the story was a hoax while others, like Padibatakakal, became obsessed with the mystery. She was a dreamer by nature and her dreams would remain lofty throughout her life. And of all the dreams made available to her in a place like Tenpenny, this was the one she put her hopes in.

Sometimes she would dwell on the great distance she would have to cover to reach the mountains, and of course there was the issue of how she would even get there. She knew she couldn't crutch herself across the valley, and her wheelchair was out of the question. She had concluded years before that horseback was the only way and she set her mind to make it happen. For many years she had spent whatever time she could near the lots, watching the men work. She learned how to shoe a horse from Wonderboy and how to rope from Henry. Other than Tipper, Jack was the best on horseback and she never missed a chance to see him ride.

Jack visited Momma Tom in the stables several times a day. And it was for this purpose that Tipper reasoned Padibatakakal had chosen to stay with the foal.

Padibatakakal was deeply in love with Jack Oakham, though she had never worked up the courage to tell him. She shuttered every time Jack came into her presence and had ever since the day Jack had arrived at Tenpenny, years before.

Padibatakakal had been an orphan at Tenpenny before there even was a Tenpenny. She was there when Tipper and Sissy had made their plans, there to watch the roads cut and the wells dug, and the trees hewn down to build the cabins. She was there when the winter came and she remembered the day Henry Snow first arrived. Tipper had left the week before, "On an exciting journey," he told her. "When I return I will have someone very special with me."

Tipper came home with the ruddy-faced Henry Snow and when Padibatakakal saw him she felt flushed, went pale. She could tell by the look of him that he was unstoppable. "He might do everything there is to do."

It was a few years later when Jack arrived and she often recalled the way he looked the first time she saw him, with hair a mess, his clothes filthy from travel. They told her he had come a long way to find the place, and that like them he had suffered the loss of his mother. Padibatakakal had watched him closely all that day, admiring him from afar, and when he stood up to Henry, a boy twice his size, she immediately fell in love with him.

If it had been almost any other girl on Tenpenny Hill she probably would have fallen in love with Henry instead, but Henry Snow was too loud for the likes of Padibatakakal. She didn't care for much talking, or for the drama that came with it. In fact on paper there was very little about Henry that she did value, though she adored him in her own way. She admitted to herself that he was the boldest of all the boys on the hill, if not the bravest, and that no one could match his charm. But ever since Tip had carried her away as a child, Padibatakakal had modeled her hopes after Tip's gentle, reliable ways and no boy reminded her of those ways like Jack Oakham did.

He would feed the horses in the mornings and ride in the afternoons. On some

days he would teach several of the children how to ride around the paddock and when they did so she stayed away, afraid that her presence would be awkward, or that someone may ask her to try. The fact was that she couldn't try, and she knew it. Every movement she made was a reminder of that. Yet she wanted to, more than anything, and she remained contented to watch the horses, even if that was all she was able to do.

Then one day, at the start of that very winter, Tip saw her sitting on the paddock fence, swinging her footless legs, and he approached her.

"Do you have a favorite?" he asked.

She smiled shyly. "I like the Duke of York."

"Which one is that?"

The girl nodded to the horses. "It's the Philly who always keeps her nose up. She's stuck up but I like her."

Tipper climbed to sit beside her and found the horse in the crowd. "A Philly named Duke? Shouldn't it be a Duchess?"

Once again she ducked shyly away, raising her shoulders and smiling. "I didn't know she was a girl when I named her. I just liked her and thought she was prancy and when Jack told me I could name her I said Duke of York cause it sounded swanky."

"You named her?"

"Yessir."

"You have a real love for horses and real loves never do well riding on a fence. I've been thinking it's time we got you in a saddle, Padi."

The girl put her hands over her face and rolled up like a ball.

"Don't be nervous. Jack and I will work with you everyday. I can make a pair of leg braces that will give you all the control you need. I was thinking we would get started in the spring when the weather breaks."

She began to cry, her face still covered.

"It'll be safer when the snow melts and that'll give me time to build your braces."

"I'd like that," she said.

And he kissed her on the crown of her head.

Lying on the spare bed in Momma Tom's cabin, Padibatakal was anxiously awaiting the arrival of spring. She had always hoped to learn as much about horses, and about her destination as she could. Momma Tom knew much about Mr. Holland, perhaps more than anyone else on Tenpenny Hill. Padibatakal wondered if Momma Tom even knew something about that treasure he was supposed to have buried in the mountains, and why a man would do such a thing. So when Padibatakal heard that the foal had been born, and the opportunity arose to share some time with Momma Tom while learning horses, and being in a place where she could expect to see Jack several times a day, she quickly requested to stay.

"Do you hear footsteps?" Padibatakal whispered.

The sound came from the lots and Momma Tom, despite her age, could hear it clearly. Someone was moving hastily through the snow. But who would be up at this hour? Momma Tom wondered. Mister Holland don't even come down from the chapel quite so early. The only other visitor who they received regularly was Jack, and Jack was even less likely to be up hours before the dawn.

"He's coming closer."

Shadows fell on the snow in the moonlight and she could see through her tiny

window a long shape, like that of a man, and in his hands was something tremendous.

“It look like Smithson,” Momma Tom said judging from the huge silhouette.
“What’s he doin’ with the horses?”

Huddled near the window they could both see the man loosening the bridles from the hitching posts and leading the mounts out of their stables. He led them each in one hand and in the other hauled up the long object.

“What’s that pole in his hands?” she asked.

They could both see him roping something to the mounts and as he turned to lead the horses out the girl unlatched the window and pushed it open, “Smithson! Is that you there?!”

When he put his finger up to his lips and shushed them they could see that it wasn’t Smithson, but Henry. His smile shined in the moonlight.

III.

The tool house door was open, which meant Jack knew who the last one was to use it. The tool house was a storage house built into the side of the old gymnasium. Jack and his father had boarded up the building late that autumn like they had every year but as he peered inside he and Putt both knew they had done a poor job of it. Above them they could hear the sounds of a dozen hurried feet shuffling across the gym floor as the tool house door squeaked. The sound circled the gymnasium above them and they both envisioned skunks, or coon pups diving out of the bleachers come thaw. Jack gave a sigh and looked down at Putt. “Might as well have invited the bears to den in the Chapel.” the old dog seemed to say.

Jack peered inside the cold dark room and nodded, “I had that one comin’.”

It didn’t take long for Jack to see that he had been right. Two abandoned tool hooks hung where the shovels should have been. He closed the door and clasped the latch. “Let’s hike up to Campbell,” Jack said. “Who knows, maybe the elk are running.”

The two sank into what was left of the snowpack as they climbed up the hill and when Putt’s feet slipped out of the snow they were brown and wet. For the first time in many months, Jack thought.

Tipper had taught Jack never to be impatient for the muddy bottoms. “There is much a young man can learn from the winter,” Tipper told him. “There is more a man can learn from the spring. But be patient because the winter’s lessons are slow ones, and when the spring comes the lessons come quick and you must pay attention. When you see the muddy bottoms you must start to think in a brand new way.”

Jack and Putt stopped suddenly as a sound echoed through the woods. They paused to listen. Jack was almost certain it was the chopping block, which usually came as the sun rose. He did hear a dull thumping, but to his surprise instead of south near Tipper’s cabin, the sound came from up the hill, and stranger yet it came in double speed, like the sound of two men chopping.

Putt was slopping the mud across the snow top, angling toward the dining hall and checking back with Jack every few steps to see if he would do the same. Jack moved steadily up the hill ignoring the old dog’s request for pancakes.

The sounds grew louder as he climbed and Jack had almost realized what they were when he saw Smithson and Wonderboy digging the ice pack out of the road above him. Smithson was a huge man, tall and shapeless with no eyebrows and almost no teeth. He was the envy of Henry because of all the men he had ever encountered, Smithson had the most flawless, jet-black beard Henry had ever seen. Everything about Smithson was disheveled except for his beard, which seemed to shine on his face like his single accomplishment. Beside him, and working feverishly, was Wonderboy, a much smaller man. The two were breaking the ice pack with a pair of ditch shovels.

“Morning,” Jack said.

“Time to break up the pack,” Smithson told him. “Your father says the spring is on.”

“I was on my way to fetch you a snow shovel.”

“Two snow shovels,” Smithson said. “We need both. We can’t find ‘em.”

“I know where they are. Have either of you seen my brother?”

Smithson leaned on the handle and spit into the snow. “How can you lose someone as big as Henry?”

“You can’t lose Henry Snow. I know. D’you happen to see him?”

Wonderboy smiled as he was in the habit of doing before he spoke, which was rarely. He was a peculiar-looking man, awkward in all occasions except heavy laughter, where he seemed right at home. He was as dark-skinned as any person Jack had ever seen, meaning he was as dark-skinned as they come, for living at Tenpenny Jack had seen it all. Wonderboy’s arms seemed a few inches too short and undeveloped, whereas his legs were longer than a man of his height should have been, and much much stronger. He had no shoulders to speak of, but a profound and exaggerated neck leading to his tiny head. It was a common dispute among the children of Tenpenny hill which man, Tip or Wonderboy, was the hardest worker. Jack’s brother Henry was the strongest member of the Tenpenny family, but even Henry admitted once, “Pound for pound I will never be as strong as Wonderboy,” to which Jack replied, “It would be a waste if you were. He works ten times harder on a bad day than you ever will on a good one.”

Wonderboy held his smile with every word he spoke. “Mister Henry went down to the lots,” he said. “He took the bigger horses.”

“Where did he take them?”

“North.”

“Toward the Kopasack?”

He nodded.

“Was the trail horse blanketed?”

“They both were. He was bareback.”

“Did he have his rifle?”

Wonderboy shook his head. “Just a box.”

“A box?”

“Under his arm,” Wonderboy said. “A white box.”

With the two men at ease Jack could clearly hear that no wood was being split on the chopping block. He looked north through the trees that were now sunning themselves fully and then peered deep into the timberland for signs of the horse tracks in the snow. But as he began to imagine all of the mayhem his brother might have gotten into, Jack Oakham decided, as he had learned to do since their childhood, not to worry about his

brother and to go about his day. "I'll be back with the shovels," he said as he marched on.

Jack was glad not to think about it. Spring was coming, there was work to be done, his belly was rumbling. I don't need to go chasing Henry all across Tenpenny before the sun has even found his way over the trees, he thought. It bothered Jack how much of a distraction his brother could be. He whistled at the old dog who reluctantly left his path down to the dining hall.

The two marched up toward Campbell field but as he was working Smithson called out to the boy. "And Jack?"

"Yessir?"

"You might check on Greer this morning. I know it's early but the nurse says she's worse than ever."

Jack nodded. His eyes were gentle. He tucked his hands in his coat pockets and turned up the hill slower, more careworn than before. Greer Ashby was one of two young ladies who Jack feared he may be in love with, though he hadn't yet decided which.

For the rest of the adventure purchase a signed copy of the book @ philipchavanne.com